

STATEMENT OF SENATOR CLELAND
HEARING ON THE DIGITAL DIVIDE AND MINORITY SERVING INSTITUTIONS
February 27, 2002

Mr. Chairman, I want to thank you for holding this important hearing. Dr. Benjamin Mays, the celebrated African-American educator and valued presidential advisor, who just happened to hail from Atlanta, Georgia once said, "Every man is born into the world to do something unique and something distinctive, and if he or she does not do it, it will never be done." Increasingly the ability to do anything in America is based on access to information and technology. For many Americans, that access is limited. The latest Census revealed that more than three-fourths of white and non-Hispanic households have access to a computer at home. By comparison, less than half of black households, 44 percent, and just over a third of Hispanic households, 38 percent, have computers in their home. These figures offer compelling evidence that a significant technology gap, the so-called digital divide, still exists for many Americans which, left unchecked, can prevent them from accomplishing that unique and distinctive thing which Dr. Mays says each man is born into this world to do.

Now just this month the Commerce Department released its latest report on Americans' access to the Internet and World Wide Web. That study, *A Nation Online: How Americans Are Expanding Their Use of the Internet*, reported an amazing finding that should give us all reason to hope. That report found that K-12 schools play a major role in reducing the digital divide. To repeat: *A Nation Online* found that solely because of the availability of school computers, schools significantly help to equalize the disparity that would otherwise exist in computer and Internet use among children, ages 10 to 17, who are of different racial, ethnic, and income backgrounds. The task before us--and the reason for today's hearing--is to ensure that the opportunity to close the economic and racial divide in the access of Americans to computers and the Internet continues in our institutions of higher education.

President Bush has continually and movingly stated that it is his Administration's mission to leave no child behind. For many of America's neediest children--those who because of income and race are caught on the wrong side of the digital divide--our Minority-Serving Institutions are the last, best chance they have of gaining the skills and tools they need to become competitive in today's high-tech, information-based workforce. It is all the more critical, then, that America's Minority-Serving Institutions, many with limited resources, be at the cutting edge of our information technology.

Toward this end, I am joined by 12 of my Senate colleagues in sponsoring S. 414, the NTIA Digital Network Technology Program Act. This legislation would create a new grant program within the Department of Commerce, the center of technological expertise and innovation in the federal government. Our bill would provide up to \$250 million to help Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Hispanic-Serving Institutions, and Tribal Colleges and Universities bridge the digital divide. Funds provided under this legislation could be used for such activities as campus wiring, equipment upgrade, technology training, and hardware and software acquisition. A Minority-Serving Institution, for example, could use funds provided under S. 414 to offer its students universal access to campus

networks, or recipients might choose to use their grant money to dramatically increase their connectivity speed rates.

This hearing has been called today to publicly pose some crucial questions. What are the technology needs of our HBCUs, Tribal Colleges, and Hispanic-Serving Institutions? What are the specific barriers to MSIs in accessing state-of-the art technology? How will technology advances at MSIs benefit our communities? What can Congress and the nation do to help these institutions become fully competitive with other institutions of higher learning in the Information Age? These are some of the questions which will be asked in today's hearing, and I am looking forward to hearing our panelists' answers and recommendations. In the ever-expanding and always exciting world of the Information Highway, it should be our mandate to work to ensure that no one in this country is left behind--least of all our leaders of tomorrow.